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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 003804

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FOR A/S DR. FRAZER, DAS YAMAMOTO FROM VICKI HUDDLESTON

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#) [ELEC](#) [UNREST](#)

SUBJECT: UNREPENTANT MELES: NO TURNING BACK AFTER BLOODY WEEK OF PROTESTS

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reason 1.4 (b,d)

¶11. SUMMARY: I asked to meet with Prime Minister Meles to follow up on a promising conversation he had with Chairman Konare of the African Union. Meles said that there was no turning back from the recent crackdown on the opposition CUDP: the jailed leaders would be tried for treason; those demonstrators guilty of damaging property or human life would be tried for lesser crimes. There would be no civil war, as the European Community Representative Clarke had predicted. Meles called the EU - US Ambassadors' statement unhelpful because its premises were flawed: CUDP leaders were not "political detainees" as stated, but rather criminals, and it was not Meles' responsibility to reconstitute the "rump" CUDP. I told Meles that the EU-US Ambassadors' statement reflected our belief that the detainees were political, that immediate action must be taken to release thousands of innocent persons arrested during and after the demonstrations, that house-to-house searches at night be stopped, and that reconciliation and dialogue were the only way forward. Meles responded that he was responsible for charting the way forward, and that it would be democratic. He would assure that the Parliament and the National Elections Board (NEB) operated according to the Constitution and the rule of law respected generally. I complained that the government had failed to act speedily on these issues and had contributed to the break down of the US-UK sponsored talks, and asked for international observers at the CUDP trial. Meles assured me that the trial would be conducted in accordance with international norms, including access to legal counsel. He did not specifically agree to international observation, but said the trial would be public and the evidence would be the statements of the CUDP leaders in the US and in Ethiopia. In response to my suggestion that a traditional Ethiopian form of reconciliation through Elders be used to reach out to the people, Meles said that the government has itself already started this process in Addis Ababa, Gondor, Bahir Dar, and a number of other provincial cities. He claimed that three hundred detainees were released on Nov. 8. Next steps include the US and the Troika continuing to press the government through private meetings and public statement on human rights and the need for reconciliation through a democratic and peaceful process. End Summary

¶12. (C) PM Meles told me that previous US statements had been generally constructive, reflective of our good partnership. However, the EU-US Statement of Sunday was altogether different. It seemed we did not understand the situation and were intervening where we should not. We should understand that what had occurred was an uprising that threatened democracy; it should be a lesson for all of us that the Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) is/was not healthy, and that new shoots must rise from its ashes; and the threat to democracy must be dealt with in a legal manner. As for CUDP members not detained, he did not want to see a "CUD Lite" extra-parliamentary opposition, nor was he planning to "coddle" them. I responded that the purpose of the EU-US statement was to be helpful and to point out that the way forward was through dialogue and reconciliation. We stated that CUDP leaders were political detainees because we believe this to be the case, and that we believed the most prudent way ahead would be to release them.

¶13. (C) Meles said the CUDP leaders would be charged with treason, that they would have access to legal counsel and that the trial would be fair and open to the public. Those detained during and after the riots were already being released, but those who had destroyed property or caused injuries or death would be prosecuted. I urged international observation of the CUDP leaders' trial, speedy release of the thousands of others who had been detained, an end of night searches and arrests and the quick restoration of calm in Ethiopian cities. Meles said that three hundred detainees in Addis had already been released, and that screening of other detainees was proceeding. He rejected the idea of using a traditional Ethiopian method of "Schmagalu" -- conflict resolution through the counsel of respected Elders -- to reach out to the suffering population. He explained that the government was already holding meetings for this purpose in Addis and regional cities where demonstrations had taken place.

14. (C) The international community, according to Meles, should not blur the line between the CUDP leaders who had been jailed, those who were not detained because they had not committed criminal acts, and the new CUDP -- should there be one. Referring to the US and EU meeting with the Parliamentary opposition last week, Meles said that we should understand that when we talk with the opposition, they would always put their best face forward -- not necessarily the true situation; he compared such sessions to "pleading to the emperor." I responded that the Parliamentary opposition was on the whole quite reasonable and needed the space to effectively represent its constituents' views. Meles underlined his point that the EU - US Ambassadors statement was "very unfortunate" and that external action/interference would never be allowed to replace the constitution and laws of the land.

15. (C) Meles told me that the worst was behind us; there would be no civil war, as EU Commissioner seemed to think. Events had unfolded as he had warned us; we should not be surprised. The PM said he had tried to avoid the violence, but once the CUDP leaders called for street action and violence erupted, there was no turning back. I pointed out that the government had unfortunately not moved swiftly to carry out the actions agreed upon during the dialogue between the parties. It remained extremely difficult for the opposition to have their voices heard or get items on the agenda in Parliament. As he well knew, the key issue of who would be appointed to the National Electoral Board remained unresolved. The Prime Minister broke in to say that building democracy in Ethiopia was his responsibility and he would do so along the lines agreed, namely appointment of impartial National Elections Board; an independent judiciary; fair parliamentary process, and rule of law and accountability. I said that we very much want to help with building a strong democracy via assistance in these critical areas. The Prime Minister wrapped up by saying that the price had been paid. It was worse than he had anticipated - the price was "very high." He would now work to move beyond recent events and carry out the needed democratic reforms. I responded that we can help with democratic reforms and that good partners can and do disagree.

16. (C) Comment: Like it or not, the way ahead is very clear: the Prime Minister intends to call the shots on democratic reforms. They will take place, but probably not as extensively or as fast as we would like. Those CUDP leaders who have not been detained will be allowed to play a political role if/if they enter Parliament. CUDP supporters in civil society and media leaders will stand trial for treason, or possibly lesser crimes. Much of the evidence against them will be their oral and written statements. While the judicial process will probably not satisfy us, the PM claims that it will be relatively open with access to legal counsel. For our part we should work closely with the Troika, and continue to make public our deep concerns about human rights and the democratic process, not just as an international standard but for the long term stability of Ethiopia. In this regards, I met with the Troika this morning to explore ways to get the EU - US statement in Amaharic into the local print media now that much of the private media is out of business and the government press refuses to run it. We also agreed to continue to press key government leaders on human rights and reform, including the Ministers of Justice and Information, the Speaker of the House, and the powerful behind the scene EPRDF operative Sabata Nega. I have hosted a town meeting for Americans and another for the Mission-wide local staff and backgrounder the international press. UK ambassador and I will likely do an interview with one or more of the still independent media to get our governments' concerns known. The US statement endorsing the EU-US statement and repeating critical parts of the message was most helpful. The Troika will seek a meeting with the PM to follow up on my conversation of last night. As the situation in the streets returns to normal, the vast majority of the detainees -- in the thousands -- will be released but several hundred charged. The government is unlikely to be shaken by another series of riots in the near future given the brutality with which this one was put down. PM Meles will move ahead with some democratic reforms. Whether they will prevent a larger and more serious outbreak of violence in the more distant future the road will depend on how effectively and rapidly they are carried out that is why we should help with building good governance. End Comment.

HUDDLESTON